

# FILE

24:2 • EMERGENCY LIBRARIAN • NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1996

## SLICE-O-LIFE POP CULTURE MENU ALL THE MEDIA YOU CAN DIGEST

### ART-UPS:

W.W. WALDORF SALAD  
STUFFED CELLULAR

### SOUPS:

LASER BISQUE  
NINJA TURTLE SOUP  
CLONE CHOWDER  
INTERNET TLE SOUP

### DESIGNER PIZZA:

MYSTERY SLICE  
POLYESTER PIZZA  
PINSTRIPE PIZZA  
VIRTUAL DIET PIZZA  
ENO CALI

### SIDES:

MASS MEDIA MAYO  
FAX FRIES

### MIGHTY MEALS:

COUCH POTATO PANCAKES  
NINTENDO NUTBURGERS  
BOOKPLATE SPECIAL  
THUMBS UP THERMIDOR  
LOTTO LAMBCHOPS  
POLITICALLY CORRECT CAPERS

### DRINKS:

MADONNA WATER [FROM VIRGIN SPRINGS]  
CELESTINE SELTZER  
STANLEY CUPPA TEA

### JUST DESSERTS:

V-CHIP COOKIES  
CHOCOLATE MOUSE  
READER'S DIGESTIVE BISCUITS  
DATA-NUT SQUARES



Media Literacy = Basic Literacy

# All That Glitters May Not Be Gold

David Loertscher

**I**n my home town of Park City, Utah, there was a creek that ran down the center of this high mountain mining town. It contained the runoff of the many silver and lead mines above the city and was labeled "Poison Creek". No one was to go near it (except for all us naughty children who could not resist the temptation). What attracted us to Poison Creek? It was all the flecks of glittering fool's gold that were liberally sprinkled throughout the thick "soup" ambling slowly down the sandy creek bottom. I still have my hair and haven't died of cancer, but who knows what was in that irresistible goop!

A very respected colleague and I were talking not too long ago about the progress she was making in her district. She had done a lot of work with the local teacher-librarians concerning collaboration and reports of many projects were coming in from the various schools. What she heard disturbed her to no end. Let me explain. Consider the scenario in the chart below:

The obvious question hits us all: Is more better? More variety of information sources? More flashiness in report format? Are we carried away by the glittering specks in the soup of presentation? The answer, of course is that all the reports can be junk; all can be marvelous examples of learning; but there may be no correlation between the amount learned, the presentation format, or the number of sources used.

In the information world and the world of multimedia, we often advocate that more is better. While we have been preaching, the information pool has increased exponentially; suddenly, the information age has come upon many schools. Thus, a few years ago where students were able to wrest only a few tidbits of information from our collections, now they are flooded. Students accustomed to mud-puddle libraries now have Olympic-size pool LMCs. Lots of young people are being thrown into the deep end of these new pools without any swimming lessons.

Consider the research process model illustrated in figure 1 (page 23).

When we divide the research process into a number of steps and teach students the process, do we also help them understand some sort of time distribution across the model? In other words, if you were a student facing an assigned project, where would most of your time be spent? Finding? Product production? Think back to several projects just completed in your school using the LMC as a resource. Students using the LMC might be observed doing the following:

1. Student selects topic rapidly — Chooses something "easy" — grabs a couple of resources, and immediately starts creating the assigned product.
2. Students only seem concerned that they have the required "three" sources of information to include in their bibliographies — they don't care which three sources just as long as they get their project in on time. They spend very little time reading or thinking but a lot of time coloring, constructing, gluing and assembling.

*Suppose you are the teacher who has sent students to the LMC to do a report.*

*When the deadline arrives, you get the projects back and they seem to divide themselves into three different types.*

*Which do you think would get the highest grade?*

**1. Student uses:**

one encyclopedia article

Paraphrases the article

Turns in a neat report with one citation.

**2. Student uses:**

1 encyclopedia article

2 periodical articles

1 map

Paraphrases the three articles.

Turns in a word processed report complete with map included.  
4 citations

**3. Student uses:**

10 periodical articles

4 books            3 videos

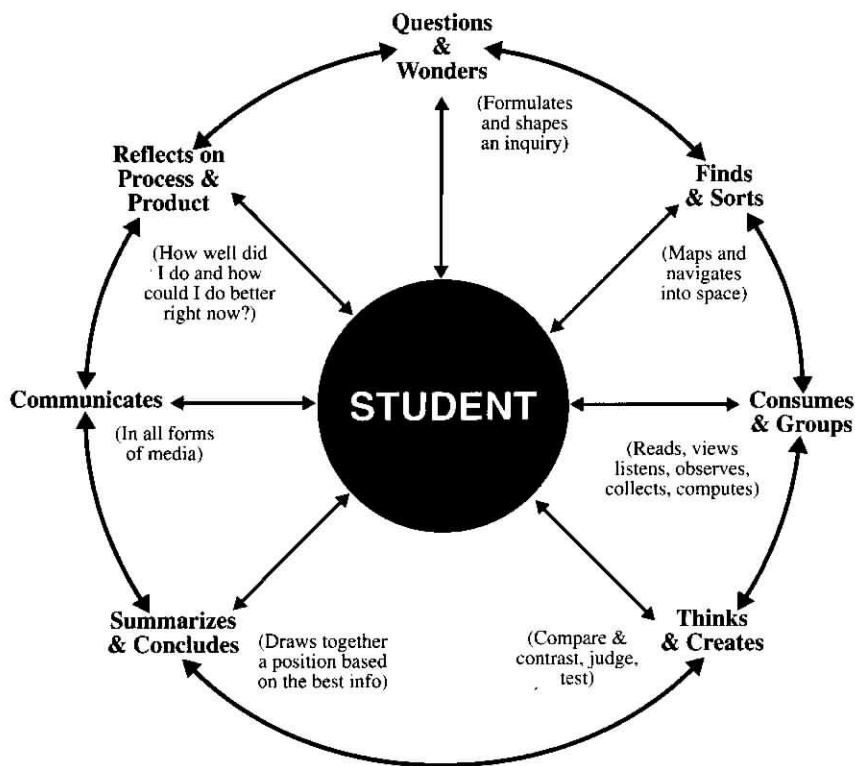
4 Internet sites

2 CD-ROM databases

1 videodisk.

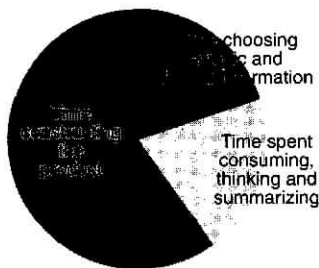
Cuts and clips various relevant pieces. Student devises clever transitions.

Presents a multimedia demonstration as a collage. 24 citations.



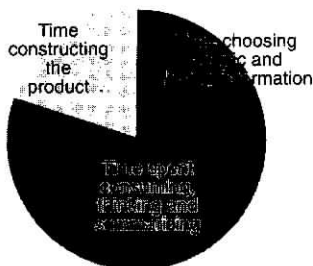
Has the student gained any more learning from the entire project? Perhaps. At least the student might be more engaged and interested. But I suspect that actual learning has increased very little.

In graphic form, this scenario might look like:

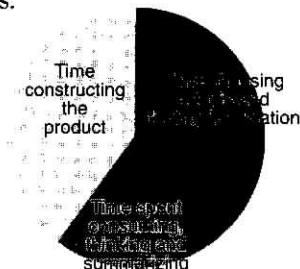


There could be a reason, however, why this scenario might be viewed positively rather than negatively. For example, if students were learning to do computer graphing as part of creating the product, or designing a web page to communicate their results, we might say that time was well spent helping students develop their technology tool skills. While there are literally hundreds of projects a student might do, their contribution to learning ought to be assessed before being assigned.

Suppose the scenario was:



Here, students are doing the hard work of actually reading the material they photocopy or print off the CD-ROMS. They are spending time thinking about what they have read, comparing ideas across information sources, pondering, solving problems, and taking time to just let things "sink in" as they work toward the "Ah-hah" experience. More common, however, I suspect the scenario looks something like this in the new Olympic-size LMCs:



Consider the student who exits the LMC with an armload of printouts, several books, some periodical articles, and a bibliography of sources to check at the public library. If it is Wednesday and the product is due Friday, there is little chance that productive thinking will go on; and without that critical component, the amount of learning will be affected.

This is why just throwing money at technology, deepening the information pool, and connecting to networks doesn't automatically make a difference in that holy grail — academic achievement. I believe that it is the desire to capitalize on the *thoughtful use* of the resources and technology that justifies the hiring of an information professional.

It is very easy to make major errors as teachers and teacher-librarians collaborate to use technology and information resources. Let us suppose we allocate two weeks to a topical unit. We can make elaborate plans to help the students find and locate their materials and produce their products. But have we made equally elaborate plans to see that students have the time needed, the encouragement, and the assistance they need as they consume, think, and synthesize what we can provide? Time spent planning with the teacher for this critical phase is essential.

This area of the research process is often unpopular with learners because it requires *work* and *time*. By the time a student has found some relevant information, the project deadline looms so large, there is little choice but to skip the reading and reflecting time. Procrastinators are memorable LMC patrons. Many of them enjoy the thrill of the deadline; some seem overwhelmed and frightened. In either case, they sweet talk us into finding the "nugget" they need to quickly complete their assignment. It is satisfying to help the "damsel in distress," and we should, but we should also remind them that there are other more appropriate ways to tackle learning assignments.

The work ethic of actually spending time reading, viewing and listening; then thinking and summarizing comes from two sources as Eshpeter and Gray (1989), remind us: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. If the task and/or the material is interesting to the

## **An example of a unit of instruction requiring a great deal of thought and consideration of evidence in an engaging problem.**

### **Engaging problem:**

One night about the last of January, 1847, Reasin P. Tucker was out and about the Johnson Ranch Northeast of Sutter's Fort in California when he saw a man coming down the Bear River. As he came closer, Reasin could see that the man was very haggard and in great distress. This living skeleton told Reasin that he was of the Donner Party and told briefly how their wagon train had been caught in the snow east of the mountains by Donner Lake and was unable to go backward or forward. Everyone was starving. He did not know if any of the Party were still alive but begged Reasin to find help. Thus began four expeditions to save the infamous Donner Party.

### **Quest:**

Using every piece of information available and several retellings of the rescue of the Donner Party, construct two timetables of the first rescue party — one timeline above the other. On the top horizontal timeline present a day-by-day account beginning January 31, 1847 of what is happening at Donner Lake. On the second, lower timeline, present a parallel day-by-day account of the first rescue party.

### **Some things you will have to consider:**

What happens to the human body when it is deprived of food for a long period of time? How long can a person survive? What extreme measures will prolong life? When food finally becomes available, how can the body begin to accept food again without harm? (Science)

What kind of person will risk life and limb on a rescue of others when the odds for success are near zero? What preparations are needed and what strategies are needed to launch and survive a rescue attempt? (Social Studies and Science)

When people reconstruct an event through various retellings, why do details and descriptions of major events conflict? How does the historian construct what actually happened from conflicting stories and very little actual evidence? (Social Studies)

### **Exhibition:**

Construct the parallel timelines in (small group activity) and then present a collaborative retelling of the entire event from two perspectives. A culminating activity might be a reader's theater of the dramatic story using the real characters. (Language Arts)

### **Notes to the Teacher and Teacher-librarian:**

Any kind of unit requiring reconstruction of an event will require original resources and copies of various retellings by numerous authors. This type of unit requires time to weigh evidence and think through a reconstruction of the events since no one source will provide the opportunity to simply cut and clip. Background knowledge of the Donner Party, the terrain they encounter, and weather patterns of the Sierra Nevada Mountains will be critical to the understanding and recreation of the events.

student, the amount of engagement time increases. Likewise, if the heavy hand of the teacher "requires" engagement either through direct assignment or as a part of the assessment, then time on this critical task will generally increase. It seems that human nature takes over quickly in schooling — even with graduate students — who constantly question the teacher on how little they have to do to get by. It is a pleasant surprise when learners get so motivated that they want you to suggest more and more and more for them to devour.

In most of the professional literature I read these days, authors are suggesting that school must be more relevant; that is, we should use various tactics to maximize intrinsic motivation. As teacher-librarians work to construct beneficial learning activities with teachers that exploit the information pool, there are mechanisms that can be set in place to encourage the student naturally to engage in more thoughtful activities (ASCD, 1996). Consider a few:

1. Turn assignments into more engaging problems. The higher the students' interest is at the outset, the more likely they are to spend more time on the task. Here are a few suggestions:
  - a. Connect assignments to the real world. (Have students tackle a real community problem, an actual political dilemma, an ethical dilemma in science).
  - b. Connect assignments to topics you know students are already interested in.
  - c. Connect abstract learning to a required performance. (Show what you know through what you can do).
  - d. Design a task that will end with exhibition to an authentic audience (parents, experts, peers across the world).
  - e. Design exhibitions in ways that will connect with careers, entrepreneurial ventures, successful businesses, contributions to quality of life. (Students use their web design skills to put up an actual business on the web.)
  - f. Have students track the process of

learning as part of the learning project itself, assessing both the product and the process at the conclusion of the unit.

2. Plan for time for students to consume, think and synthesize. You might even conduct mini-lessons that focus the students' attention on this valuable activity. Some of the study skills literature might help here — although the mini-lessons suggested in various books and manuals suffer from the same problems as our old library skills models — busy work unconnected with any project the students are doing in the classroom. Examples of mini-lesson topics might be:

- a. Techniques to extract ideas from text, lectures, visuals and electronic sources.
- b. Self questioning or reflecting techniques.
- c. Techniques of comparison, contrast, rejection of misinformation.
- d. Ways to increase time on task.
- e. Ways to increase persistence and enhance work habits.
- f. Ways to judge when enough is enough.
- g. Ways to increase memory and concentration.

3. Construct product assignments that require the students to think rather than cut, clip and copy. In other words, students won't be able to find "the answer" in any source.

- a. Compare and contrast various information sources, consider alternative ideas, create several perspectives or points of view.
- b. Verification of data in several sources before use.
- c. Analysis of trends or big picture looks.
- d. Take a position other than X source does.
- e. Change the genre (transform one medium into another).

4. Create assessments or rubrics so that students know that they are being measured on the thoughtful way they approach the work, interact with the resources and transform substance

into the product. Sample statements in the rubric might be:

- a. Each main point is supported by relevant, accurate and specific pieces of information.
- b. Main points and supporting details come from numerous sources.
- c. Information from personal experience or data from personal experimentation or observation provide additional support to the argument.
- d. It is obvious to the reader or viewer of the project that a great deal of thought has gone into the presentation (ASCD, 1996).

When concern for *all* the steps of the research process is reflected in collaborative planning, particularly those which require the student to actually spend time consuming, thinking and summarizing, then amazing things happen in resource-based teaching and learning. You know you are achieving success when someone asks: "Tell me about some great learning experiences that happened in the LMC this past year." Numerous examples will come to mind rather than a stupor of thought. And the results will be laced with more than flecks of fool's gold.

#### References:

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- Newmann, Fred, Secada, Walter, & Wehlage, Gary. (1995). *A guide to authentic instruction and assessment: Vision, standards and scoring*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research. (A second useful source.)
- Performance-based learning and assessment*. (1996). Educators in Connecticut's Pomperaug Regional School District 15. Alexandria, VA: ASCD. (An excellent and very practical source created by teachers for teachers.)

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